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The Arab Spring and the Italian Response to Migration in 2011

Beyond the Emergency

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Abstract

This paper seeks to unpack and explain the relationship between the emergency rhetoric used by Italian politicians and the policies implemented in Italy in response to the influx of irregular migrants from North Africa during 2011. It analyses how the language relates to the policies adopted and considers the impact on relations between Italy and the European Union (EU) in the area of migration. Accordingly, I address two main questions. How can we understand the emergency lexicon in relation to the policies adopted by Italy in response to irregular arrivals from North Africa in 2011? Secondly, what are the implications for EU-Italian engagement? In other words, how has the vehement and popularized emergency-centred debate in Italy affected interaction between Italy and the EU?

To tackle these questions, the analysis is divided into five sections. The first section introduces the academic discussion on migration in Italy and focuses on three themes central to this paper: emergency, ambiguities in migration policies, and the EU as *vincolo esterno* (external constraint). The second section illustrates briefly the methodology employed and explains the selection of the case-study. Thirdly, I outline and examine the policies implemented by Italy between January and December 2011 and investigate the shifting language along the crisis-normality continuum. The fourth section turns to the international level and chronicles the relations between Italy and the European Union concerning irregular arrivals from North Africa. With regard to the latter, attention is given to the implications of the agreement between Tunisia and Italy. The domestic and international strands are brought together in the fifth section, which probes the reliance on discourses of emergency in the way that migration and asylum policies are presented vis-à-vis the European Union. Fear, I argue, remains a key factor in the shaping of ideas and policies across

both the domestic and international domains. However, not all the policies adopted can be ascribed to the logic of fear alone, and indeed some actually run counter to the emergency rationale that shapes the wider political debate.

Keywords: Italy, European Union, Migration, Arab Spring, emergency

1. Introduction

As a result of the pro-democracy uprisings in 2011, hundreds of thousands of irregular migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers fled Libya for neighboring countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Niger, and tens of thousands more sailed towards Italy. Because of this large and irregular influx, ideas of invasion and emergency framed the public debate in relation to migration during the uprisings. Academics broadly agree that fear and misrepresentation have characterized the stance of the EU as a whole, and that of southern European countries, such as Italy, in particular. The Arab Spring has amplified the logic of criminalization and securitization that has long marked immigration debate in Italy and elsewhere (Carrera, den Hertog & Parkin 2012). The public attention framed by an emergency prospective has partially hindered an informed discussion (Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini, 2011 and Zupi, 2012).

Against this background, this paper seeks to unpack and explain the emergency rhetoric in the language used by Italian politicians vis-à-vis the policies implemented by their government in response to the influx of migrants from North Africa in 2011. The aim is to test the notion of emergency by comparing the discursive constructions with the actual policies. The paper analyses the variations in the language and the policies adopted and considers how these affected EU-Italian relations in the area of migration. In keeping with these broad objectives, I address two main questions. How we can we understand the emergency lexicon in relation to the policies adopted by Italy in response to arrivals from North Africa in 2011? Secondly, what are the implications for EU-Italian interaction in the area of migration? In other words, how has the vehement and popularized emergency-centred debate in Italy affected the interaction between Italy and the European Union?

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second section illustrates the methodology employed and explains the choice of the case-study. Thirdly, I outline the policies implemented by Italy between January and December 2011 and investigate the shifting language along the crisis-normality continuum. The fourth section turns to the international level and chronicles the relations between Italy and the European Union concerning irregular arrivals from North Africa. With regard to the latter, special attention is given to the implications of the agreement between Tunisia and Italy. The domestic and international strands are brought together in the fifth section, which probes the Italian reliance on discourses of emergency in the way that migration and asylum policies are presented vis-à-vis the European Union. Fear, I argue, remains a key factor in the site of ideas and policies across both the domestic and international domains. However, not all the policies adopted can be ascribed to the logic of fear alone, and indeed some actually run counter to the emergency rationale that shapes the broader political debate.

2. Setting the discussion

The rich literature that, since at least the 1980s, has investigated migration flows to and through Italy is an apt reminder of the need to maintain an historical perspective when studying migration trends and policies in Italy. Migration flows to, from and through Italy have been investigated by, inter alia, Bonifazi (1998), Calavita (1994), Colombo and Sciortino (2004), Pugliese (2002), Zincone (2000 and 2006). Ample attention has been given to the role of media and public opinion (Diamanti and Bordignon, 2001), asylum and arrivals by sea (Monzini, Pastore, Sciortino, 2004; Coslovi, 2007; Ambrosini and Marchetti, 2008; Hein 2010), integration (Zincone, 2000 and 2001; Ambrosini, 2001; Campani 2008) and racism and criminality (Palidda, 1996 and Campani 1993). The same applies to the development of Italian legal framework on migration (Pepino, 1999; Livi Bacci, 2002; Caputo, 2002, Paleologo, 2007), the situation in the labour market (Calvanese and Pugliese 1988, and Reyneri, 2010) and the Euro-Mediterranean context (Fargues and Fandrich, 2012; Nascimbene and Di Pascale, 2011; Cassarino, 2012; Geddes, 2008). This academic output testifies to a debate that is both long-standing and diversified. In the context of this ample literature, three themes are relevant for our initial purposes: emergency, ambiguities of migration policies and the EU as *vincolo esterno*.

The first strand centres on the notion of 'crisis', here used interchangeably with that of 'emergency'. This debate is not new to migration. In fact,

some would argue that crisis is intrinsic to that debate. As Joppke puts it, during migration crisis Western states frequently end up admitting more immigrants than their restrictive policies would officially sanction (Joppke, 1998: 11). The sense of crisis stems from a perceptible increase in the burden that migrants impose on the host community (Zolberg, 1989: 415). Based on this literature, the starting assumption of this paper is that the European debate on migration is skewed towards fears of crisis and images of a putative invasion from neighboring, poorer countries (de Haas, 2007). On the one hand, right-wing populist rhetoric is becoming increasingly hegemonic in European countries (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). The populist norm treats the category of foreigners as the single pervasive challenge to society. Two distinct aspects related to the employment of emergency lexicon are worth noting. On the other hand, "notionally restrictionist policies" are often in tension with an expansionist policy reality (Joppke, 1998: 18-19). As Castles eloquently argues, if measured against their stated objectives, migration policies appear to fail (Castles, 2004). One of the reasons for this relates to the misleading way in which politicians present their goals to the electorate, linked to the short-term policy cycle determined by the length of electoral periods. Geddes put it simply, "politicians may want to be seen to build the fortress because when immigration is a salient issue there are likely to be votes in seeking 'zero immigration.'" (Geddes, 2000: 27). This leads to the second theme elaborated in the literature and at the centre of this endeavor, i.e. contradictions in Italian migration discourses and policies.

As Zincone has observed, the Italian approach to migration is characterised by a mismatch between the empirical functioning of immigration systems and the apprehension of such functioning by policy-makers and legislation (Zincone 2009). This relates to the dichotomy between "benevolent" practices that are addressed to expert committees and "low-strata" lobby, and malevolent ones that rely on extra-political domains (Zincone, 1998). Italian immigration policies run on a dual track: on the one hand, increasing repression of criminal behaviour while, on the other, gradual extension of rights to immigrants (Zincone, 1998). As Pastore similarly noted, Italy's tumultuous migratory system has been driven by economic and demographic factors, with politics and culture seeking in vain to catch up (Pastore, 2004). The resulting schizophrenia heralds good-looking pieces of legislation with concrete policy responses that have, however, suffered from insufficient funding and an inadequate administrative culture (Pastore, 2004). Another aspect adds to this complexity: the relationship with the European Union, to which I now turn.

A third major thread in the scholarly debate concerns the role of the European Union and, in particular, the domestic impact of EU obligations. According to a classic argument, the EU acts an external constraint, a *vincolo esterno* (Dyson and Featherstone 1996). Analytically, the concern here is with the structural power of actors and domestic institutions and how the EU reconfigures these in terms of *interests* and *ideas.* The underlying assumption is that different domestic political structures "refract Europeanization in different directions" (Radaelli, 2000). As initially propounded by Guido Carli (1993), the approach explores how the Italian technocratic elite employs an externally-imposed discipline to overcome the problems posed by the *partitocrazia*, the domination of government by parties. In a country characterized by entrenched impediments to reform, the EU-driven constraints – so it is postulated – act as catalysts for domestic policy change. This paper builds upon these three concepts in order to better understand the multifaceted relationship between the construction of the emergency discourse and the policies actually implemented. However, before turning to the empirical analysis, some words on methodology and case selection are in order.

3. The methodological and theoretical framework

In mainstream linguistics, the definition of discourse analysis focuses on the semiotic interpretation of units of either spoken or written language. The emphasis is on the analysis of texts, detecting and tracing signs and symbols in their social contexts. In particular, from the perspective of "critical discourse analysis", the concern is with the role played by language in producing power relations and social and political identities. This approach thus reflects on the symbolic representations of the written and spoken word and of power relations (Chadwick, 2000: 284). Overall, research into discourses combines the study of language use, verbal interaction, conversation, text and communicative events (Van Dijk, 2011). In this paper I propose a minimal definition of political discourse as the sum of ideas articulated in the public discourse (Chadwick, 2000: 289). It is assumed that access to, and control over, certain discourses reflects and reproduces mechanisms of power (Van Dijk, 2011). Embedded as they are in political, social and historical contexts, I look at how discourses conflate shifting voices and motivations and how they are reflected on policy decisions at both domestic and European level. The approach addresses the "polyphony" of texts (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 17) and their contradictions at the interface

between Italian domestic politics and European response. The employment of discourse analysis, with its particular affinity to socially situated power variables, helps us to understand and explain the relationship between the conjured exodus of migrants from North Africa and the actual policy response to migration flows.

For reasons of space, I focus on the language used in parliamentary debates. The empirical section is based on the texts of Italian parliamentary debates accessed through the online archives of the Italian Parliament, as well as official legal texts and ordinances. Material was selected on the basis of the pertinence to migration flows in 2011. The same applies to the research on the European dimension, which relies on official documents. For the sake of balance, primary sources have been complemented with secondary material, including interviews and public statements. Undoubtedly such a focus on parliamentary debates is not problem-free. Parliamentary actors have limited leeway, since migration is an executive-dominated area. In addition, given coalitional politics and 'behind closed doors' negotiations, it is difficult, in fact impossible, to capture all aspects of the decision-making process. Similarly, I do not look at other relevant voices such as media and non-governmental organizations. It follows that the analysis presented herein is in no way regarded as comprehensive. Having briefly defined the methodology, I now turn to case-selection.

The selected case enjoys a broader representativeness while being demarcated in time. The so-called Arab Spring has unleashed profound changes, with far-reaching impacts on regional patterns of mobility. The magnitude of the migratory flows that have accompanied the uprisings in North Africa and the protracted war in Syria testify to their historical significance. Put simply, since 2011 the Euro-Mediterranean region as a whole has witnessed migratory flows as unanticipated as much complex. In the public debate in Europe and neighboring countries, notions such as humanitarian emergency and crisis response are becoming entrenched, even normalized. This is in stark opposition to the exceptional, ad hoc connotation that these expressions suggest. These reflections form the context, and explain the focus, of this paper. In relation to ongoing developments in the Euro-Mediterranean region there is a need to probe the relationship between the rhetorical employment of emergency vocabulary in relation to the policies implemented; and the case of the Italian response offers a case in point. It is circumscribed in time in so far as the outflow from North Africa in relation to the crisis in North Africa in 2011 has now ended. Italy's position is also emblematic because of its geographical proximity to North Africa, and its role as a transit and destination country. It speaks to a central

predicament of today's migration management from the European point of view: that of responding in a concerted manner to unexpected and large scales migratory flows. The case of Italy lends itself to the analysis of the dichotomy between representations of extra-ordinariness and the routine nature of policy responses.

4. The domestic level: unpacking the relationship between discourses and policies

Since January 2011, migratory patterns to Europe and across North Africa have changed in significant ways. Two types of movements can be identified, and the comparison between the two gives a sense of the extent of the supposed "migration crisis": arrivals in 2011 versus those in the course of the previous decade. The first movement concerns third country nationals who fled North Africa for Europe. Between January and August 2011, 52,000 people arrived in Italy by boat from North Africa: 27,000 from Libya and the remainder from Tunisia (UNHCR, 2011). A comparison with the data on arrivals recorded over the course of the previous decade, when on average 20,000 irregular migrants a year landed on Italian shores (figure 1), leads to one fairly simple conclusion: in the wake of the Arab Spring, irregular migration towards Italy has increased. It follows that arrivals in Italy by sea recorded during 2011 are high by historical standards. This applies specifically to refugees and asylum-seekers. In fact, the number of asylum requests submitted in 2011 was three times the figure for 2010: in 2011 34,120 applied for asylum, while in 2010 10,050 requests were lodged (SPRAR, 2011 and UNHCR, 2012). Yet two important caveats apply.

First, these numbers represent a small proportion of overall arrivals in Italy. In fact, Italy's yearly migration quotas have increased over the years. Interestingly, even the centre-right coalition of Silvio Berlusconi, which had won the 2001 election after proposing restrictions on migration, was forced to bow to the requests of employers' associations for drastic increases. After a slight decrease in 2002, the 2005 quotas were three times as high as those for 1999 (Cuttitta, 2008: 47). The continuous rise in migration quotas demonstrates that the actual demand for labour in Italy has been much higher than political actors have been willing to admit (Pastore, 2007). These measures evidence the mismatch between what politicians say in terms of reducing migration and actual immigration politics.

Secondly, irregular migrant flows to Italy in 2011 represent only a fraction of those across North Africa during the same year. According to

the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as of October 2011 about approximately 700,000 third country nationals had crossed Libya's borders into Tunisia and Egypt, as well as into Algeria, Niger, Chad and Sudan (IOM, 2011). This reveals seemingly paradoxical trends. While irregular migratory flows to Italy in 2011 were lower than regular arrivals, and limited compared to the movements recorded across North Africa, the internal political discussion focused on the idea of "emergency". As I shall argue below, Italian immigration policies implemented with respect to North Africa transcend this unilateral framing and speak to a diverse range of interests and audiences, going *beyond the emergency logic*.

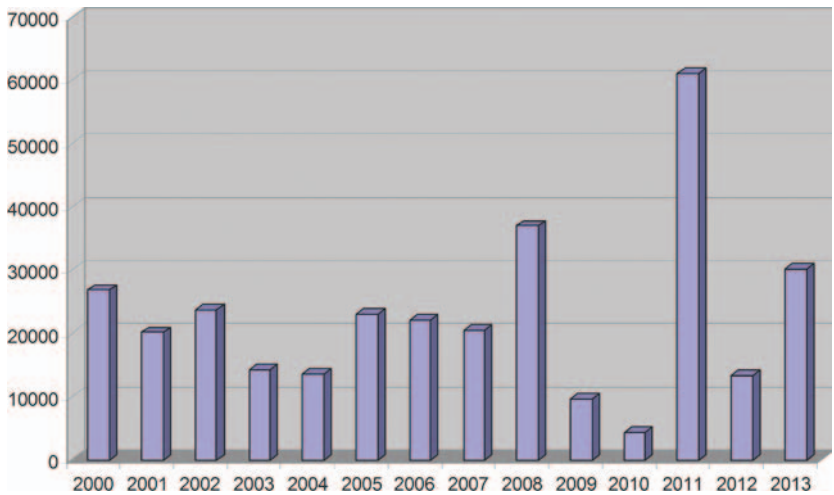

Figure 1 Irregular arrivals to Italy by sea between 2000 and 2013
Source: Elaborated from Cuttitta (2008) and European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2013)

In the early days of the unrest across North Africa, the Italian government took action to address the looming "human tsunami" from North Africa. On 12 February 2011, Prime Minister Berlusconi issued a decree establishing a state of humanitarian emergency in Italy (Consiglio dei Ministri, 2011) and enacted extraordinary measures in order to provide adequate facilities and deliver humanitarian assistance within Italy (Consiglio dei Ministri, 2011). Under the Prime Ministerial Order n. 3924 on 12 February 2011 (Ordinanza del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri), the Prefect of Palermo was appointed Special Commissioner with full powers to implement programmes in response to the emergency (Campesi, 2011 and Governo, 2011). To do so,

the Special Commissioner was provided with around 200 troops from the Armed Forces (Governo, 2011).

Subsequently, in a decree published in the Official Gazette on 11 April 2011 Italy declared a state of humanitarian emergency across North Africa, in order to strengthen the humanitarian response there (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2011a). Italy committed herself to "to engage in extraordinary and urgent measures in order to provide humanitarian assistance in North Africa, while ensuring the effective fight against illegal immigration within the national territory" (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2011b).

In addition, on 31 March 2011, the Italian Minister of the Interior tabled a plan to accept migrants who had arrived from Tunisia since January 2011 (Senato della Repubblica, 2011a and Ministero dell'Interno, 2011b). As detailed further below, with resources made available from the Civil Protection Fund all regions were requested to take an active part in the reception of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers from North Africa (Libero, 7 April 2011). Another ordinance by Prime Minister Berlusconi, published in the Official Gazette on 24 September 2011, allocated €230 million to tackle the "humanitarian emergency in the country in relation to the exceptional influx of citizens from the countries of North Africa." The budget of the National Fund of Civil Protection included €46 million for the provision of shelters (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2011b).

Legislation on the repatriation of third-country nationals was also revised. On 2 August 2011, the Italian Parliament ratified law 129/2011 containing provisions for the implementation of European Directive 2004/38/EC on the free movement of EU citizens and for the transposition of Directive 2008/115/EC on the repatriation of irregular third-country nationals (Parlamento Italiano, 2011). This law authorized the forcible removal from Italy of individuals not fulfilling the requirements set out by the EU Directive on Free Movement and who failed to comply with an order to leave the country within a certain timeframe. Furthermore, law 129/2011 increased the time-limit for the detention of irregular migrants from six to 18 months (Amnesty International, 2011).

Notably, however, despite the "migration crisis" in North Africa, standard migration policies continued to be implemented. This was the case, for example, of migration quotas and the European Integration Fund. On 17 February 2011, the Italian Ministries of the Interior and of Manpower issued the decree on annual quotas, and 60,000 places for third-country nationals were made available (Ministero dell'Interno, 2011a). Similarly, as part of the initiatives funded by the European Integration Fund (EIF), the Italian Ministry of the Interior initiated the implementation of measures

to facilitate the integration of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers into Italian society (Ministero dell'Interno, 2011d).

As part of the EIF, between January and September 2011, the Italian *Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati* (SPRAR) collaborated with Civil Protection to assist 4,865 persons from Afghanistan (13.7%), Somalia (13.1%), Eritrea (10.8%), Nigeria (7.6%) and Pakistan (5.9%) (SPRAR, 2011: 47). Furthermore, as part of the *Piano per l'accoglienza dei migranti* envisioned in the Decrees of 12 February and 7 April 2012, the Italian regions provided assistance to 22,216 persons in the form of food, housing and healthcare. This was made possible by collaboration between regions and so-called "implementing partners", including civil society organizations (SPRAR, 2011: 48).

On 17 September 2011, the European Commission granted Italy the sum of €27 million in co-financing for the implementation of the annual programme for 2011 (Ministero dell'Interno, 2011c). This fund covered a variety of activities, such as language training, employment generation workshops, assistance with accommodation, cultural mediation and intercultural dialogue (Ministero dell'Interno, 2011d).

From this brief review, it can be argued that Italian migration policies in 2011 present numerous inconsistencies, alternating between short-term, emergency-oriented approaches and long-term ones going beyond irregular arrivals from North Africa. Indeed, the fact that not all the policies implemented during and after the crisis in North Africa were of the former type is highly significant. To an extent, this complexity reflects the domestic political debate, which tends to demonize and scapegoat migrants. To better understand the fuzzy relationship between discourse and practice in relation to notions of crisis, I turn to two issues that framed the debate on migration in response to the uprisings in North Africa: repatriations to Tunisia and the setting up of camps in Italy.

The first issue relates to the repatriation of persons who had reached Italy by sea from North Africa. Notably, the Italian Right-wing party Lega Nord (Northern League) insisted on the repatriation of irregular migrants. This position emerges from the following quote by the Lega parliamentarian Lorenzo Bodega during a parliamentary debate:

> The worry felt by many Italians, who fear the arrival of potential terrorist fugitives or mere profiteers exploiting the confusion in order to land in Italy in the guise of refugees, is justified. Maroni is therefore right to request support from Europe. This should not be used to facilitate the stay of abusive but should be used to encourage their repatriation. Lega Nord supports an

> attitude of firmness, so that Italy is not overwhelmed by an unsustainable number of migrants (Senato della Repubblica, 2011b: VIII).

Unsurprisingly, Roberto Maroni, the pro-Lega Minister of the Interior, was a vocal proponent of bilateral agreements with the governments of countries such as Tunisia, as well as with Libya's National Transitional Council. Upon the finalization of the accord with Tunisia, Maroni explained that the measures would prevent clandestine immigration and thus allow Italy to "turn off the tap" of irregular migrants from North Africa (Corriere della Sera, 5 April 2011). Arguments in favour of repatriation often made reference to a lack of European support. This position is summarized in the following statement by Sonia Vitale, Undersecretary of the Interior, before Parliament on 28 September. Viale maintained:

> It is the duty of all European Member States to help countries under particular migratory pressures such as Italy today, not only in terms of equitable burden-sharing but also with regard to the assumption of specific responsibilities (Camera dei Deputati, 2011c: 4).

As a matter of fact, the ostensible need for forceful action due to the absence of European support represents an element of continuity in the discourse of Italian politicians, one that features irrespective of party distinctions. At the same time, the emergency rhetoric served to galvanize attention and to secure extra support from Brussels. In fact, since the onset of arrivals from North Africa in the 1990s, both Lega and the Italian government as a whole blamed the European Union for failing to take a tough stance on the issue of migration and to support Italy (Geddes, 2008: 358).

The second issue regards the role of the Italian regions in the provision of shelter for those fleeing from North Africa. The government proposal to set up camps across Italy for migrants fleeing North Africa generated intense debate. Strong resentment was voiced by Italian regions and politicians concerning both the location and the type of assistance involved. During a parliamentary debate the head of *Partito Democratico*, Pier Luigi Bersani, condemned the Italian government's slow response to a crisis which, in his view, was neither unprecedented nor unforeseeable (Camera dei Deputati, 2011d). The President of the Italian Confederation of Regions, Vasco Errani, opposed the measure in so far as the "tendopoli" (tent cities) would be "unmanageable" (La Stampa, 2011). Accommodation in host families was put forward as a possible alternative. As the mayor of Padova, Silvio Zanonato, observed, regions like Veneto were in favour of a "tangible kind of solidarity"

whereby migrants would be hosted in small structures in different towns and cities in Veneto (Corriere del Veneto, 2011).

Eventually, the government made it clear that all regions, with the exception of Abruzzo (because of the 2009 earthquake), were expected to provide assistance and that "refusal would not be justified" (Fatto Quotidiano, 31 Marzo 2011). Yet the process of selecting the sites was dogged by controversies. For example, on 29 March 2011 the region of Tuscany lamented the fact that it had been informed of the opening of a camp in the town of Pisa by the national media rather than through official channels (Camera dei Deputati, 2011d). These quarrels notwithstanding, Italian regions made space available to host up to 50,000 persons.

This brief review of the debate among Italian politicians sheds light on the complex relationship between rhetoric and policies. On the one hand, ideas centred on the notion of emergency informed the Italian policy response to the crisis in North Africa, and to the irregular arrivals in particular. On the other hand, Italy also undertook a wide range of actions unconnected with any putative prospect of invasion by migrants from North Africa. In other words, notions of *imagined* crisis only partially capture Italy's multifaceted response to the humanitarian crisis in Libya and the region.

We are thus led to two of the central themes of this paper, those of crisis and of ambiguities instrumental to test emergency discursive practices. The crisis lexicon, which nourishes public anxieties, is partially at odds with the policies implemented (Zincone, 1998). Diverging interests and actors disclose a multifaceted policy milieu. These multiple dimensions of Italian policymaking have had a significant impact on the country's relations with Europe.

5. The international level: relations between Italy and the EU

In its interactions with Europe on the increasing migratory flows from North Africa, Italy's objective was straightforward. As the Prime Minister put it, in all its bilateral and multilateral exchanges Italy sought to "block migrant fluxes" (TGSky, 31 March 2011). In this context, the diplomatic re-engagement between Italy and Tunisia in 2011 provides insightful clues.

On 5 April 2011, Italy and Tunisia signed an "exchange of notes" (Il Secolo, 3 April 2011). While the full details of this agreement remain undisclosed at the time of writing, it reportedly envisaged active cooperation between the two nations, both to prevent irregular arrivals in Italy and to repatriate

Tunisian nationals (Senato della Repubblica, 2011a: vi). As the then Minister of the Interior, Roberto Maroni, made it clear, the goal of this agreement was to reinforce the collaboration between Italian and Tunisian security forces "in order to prevent the arrival of clandestine migrants on Italian shores. In fact the agreement envisions simplified procedures for repatriation" (Camera dei Deputati, 2011a). For our initial purposes, two aspects of the agreement are worth mentioning: the issuance of temporary protection permits, and repatriation to Tunisia. Above all, they illustrate the extent to which the EU mechanisms and related emergency discourses were together used as a Trojan Horse for at least a temporary solution to irregular arrivals from North Africa. If nothing else, the emphasis on emergency served the purpose of appealing for extra help from Brussels.

With regard to the former, on 7 April 2011 the Council of Ministers formally agreed to issue temporary residence permits on humanitarian grounds to Tunisian citizens who had reached Italy between 1 January 2011 and 5 April 2011. The Italian Prime Minister signed a decree implementing Article 20 of the "*Testo Unico*" on migration. Approximately 25,000 Tunisian nationals who had landed in Italy during that period were granted temporary protected status and, *in principle*, free circulation within the Schengen area (Pascouau: 2011: 1). As mentioned above, this proposal initially met with significant objections. The government had first to win over its political allies, and especially Lega Nord, which saw this temporary protection as an amnesty in disguise. Eventually, support was secured on the grounds that the measure would alleviate the migratory pressure on Italy, inasmuch as it would allow Italy to act as a transit zone as opposed to a destination (Campesi, 2011). As Umberto Bossi put it: "I agree with this solution as long as they go to France and Germany" (Quotidiano Nazionale 6 April 2011, quoted in Campesi, 2011). On 6 October 2011 the temporary permits were renewed for a further six months (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2011a).

As we shall see, this decision gave rise to intense debate at the European level. The dispute with France and the EU shows the extent to which the *vincolo esterno* strategically employed by Italy proved to be a double-edged sword. Free movement within the Schengen area, which was used as leverage in the decision to grant temporary protection, led to negative side-effects. Similarly, excessive use of emergency language was arguably intended primarily to secure extra European support.

The second aspect of the proposal entailed the repatriation of Tunisians who arrived after the signing of the agreement. Between April and October 2011, 3,385 Tunisian nationals were returned to Tunisia (Ministero dell'Interno, 2011e). To some Italian politicians, the immediate decrease

in migration from Tunisia to Italy once the agreement came into force represented evidence of its success (Senato della Repubblica, 2011c: 18). As the Italian Minister of the Interior declared on 31 May, "the agreement with Tunisia is working. In fact since April the number of arrivals from Tunisia has been very small" (Camera dei Deputati, 2011b). However, the discussions with other European member countries were not unproblematic: the Italian decision to grant temporary permits proved particularly controversial.

On 11 April 2011, the European Justice and Home Affairs Council rejected the joint Italian-Maltese demand to extend temporary residence permits for Tunisian migrants to cover the rest of Europe. The resulting disappointment felt by the Italian government was voiced by Roberto Maroni, who bemoaned the lack of support shown to Italy and questioned "whether there is any point in remaining in the EU" (European Parliament, 2011). From 5 April 2011 onwards France intensified checks along the border with Italy and on 17 April blocked cross-border rail traffic (Wall Street Journal 8 April 2011). The French move prompted an immediate reaction from Lega Nord. Protesters from Lega demonstrated in Ventimiglia, arguing that the arrival of Tunisians was a direct consequence of France's decision to attack Libya (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 4 April 2011). The diplomatic dispute gave rise to remonstrations on the part of Lega Nord. On 17 April, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs lodged a formal protest with the French government, claiming that the French measures were "illegitimate and in clear violation of general European principles" (The Guardian, 17 April 2011).[1]

To add nuance to the picture, it is noteworthy that the EU-wide approach to North Africa refrained from endorsing the "migration crisis" jargon, and instead advocated a broader notion of mobility. Following the fall of Tunisia's Ben Ali on 14 January and of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011, the European Commission (EC) made a commitment to support nascent democracies and to implement a comprehensive approach to migration. On 8 March 2011, the EC President, José Manuel Barroso, launched the "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean". This incentive-based approach involved, among other things, "Mobility Partnerships" to provide a comprehensive framework that would ensure that the movement of persons between the EU and a third country would be "well-managed" (European Commission, 2011). The overarching aim was to maximize the positive impact of migration on development while combating irregular migration. Specific activities included visa facilitation agreements, labor migration between Member States and third countries, voluntary return arrangements, working arrangements with Frontex, and the conclusion of readmission

agreements (European Commission, 2011). By and large, in addressing the needs of emerging democracies across North Africa, the European Commission sought to minimize the significance of the "migration crisis" and instead to frame arrivals in Lampedusa as an ordinary afflux of irregular migration (Campesi, 2011: 1). Against this multifaceted background, an underlying thread becomes noticeable in the Italian context, namely that of an *imagined* crisis.

6. Likening domestic to international engagement: crisis as normality

The stirring up of alarmism about a looming migration crisis is not a new political device. Since they are bound up with broader processes of social change and structural socio-economic transformations (Castles and Miller, 2003), migration and refugee movements often invite to debates centered on the idea of "crisis" (Zolberg, 2001). To an extent, party politics is the culprit. Fear-mongering and questioning of the stability of the system are intrinsic to electoral and party dynamics. To a certain degree this explains the endurance of emergency-centered political approaches – largely at the level of discourse as opposed to actual policies – which are legitimized through a multitude of legal instruments and policy decisions. In other words, the shrewd utilization of powerful images of impending disasters is a well-established political tactic. These, however, remain merely "images" in so far as both migration patterns and policy responses reveal a more much differentiated picture, defying that of crisis. As demonstrated in the first section, in the case of migration to Italy the available figures easily discredit the sensationalist representation of an invasion. In fact, the number of arrivals to Italy from North Africa was very low, not only in comparison with movements across North Africa but also in the context of annual immigration quotas to Italy. As the Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe, Thomas Hammarberg, documented in the report following his visit to Italy on 26-27 May 2011, migrants from Libya to Italy make up just 2 per cent of people who have left Libya as a result of the conflict. Indeed, according to the Commissioner's count, as of 7 September 2011, 98 per cent of those leaving Libya crossed land borders into Tunisia, Egypt, Niger, Chad and Algeria (Council of Europe, 2011). This observation is relevant in so far as it contextualizes the idea of either a developing or imminent migration crisis in Italy. It follows that the *relative* magnitude

of migration as experienced by Italy, and by Europe as a whole, during 2011 necessitates a critical reassessment of the notion of "crisis."

On the one hand, a number of measures reinforcing the idea of crisis were indeed put forward. Yet on the other, Italy supported measures and financed multilateral actions inspired by a greater set of considerations. In turn, the mixed and contradictory emphasis on the "invasion" is implicated with the broader internal and international debate and serves a shifting range of interests. We are thus led to consider the complex landscape of agenda-setting and the multiple lines of connection between domestic and international realms. The mismatch between the discursive use of emergency and policies implemented shows the deep-seated contradictions that have long been postulated by Zincone (1998). At the same time, attempts to use EU mechanisms as an external safety-valve - such as the recourse to emergency discourse to secure EU support and the issuance of temporary permits exploiting the Schengen area - present numerous limits and are not sustainable. In fact EU-Italian relations have been characterized by a mixed-policy response.

Italy expressed alarm about irregular arrivals from North Africa, and in the discussions with Brussels priority was given to actions serving to crack down on the flow of "clandestine" migrants. Notably, in the aftermath of the revolutions Italy was among the first countries to seal agreements on migration with Tunisia and Egypt (Ministero degli Esteri, 2011) and, well before the fall of Tripoli, with Libya's National Transition Council (Memorandum of Understanding, 2011). Yet elements of openness towards migration and a more diversified migration response can also be observed. Beyond the ostensible crisis of irregular arrrivals, both Italy and the EU sought to support democratic transition across North Africa. Discrepancies between bilateral and multilateral arrangements, and between discourse and policy stances, persist confirming Italy's "propensity for self-contradiction" (Zincone, 1998). The populist commitment to an imagined territorial identity – epitomized in the stance taken by Lega Nord as well as by the Italian government – remains a tactic (but one only symbolically effective) of dividing citizens from 'strangers' and securing electoral leeway (Anderson, Gibney and Paoletti, 2011). Yet the mix of policies endorsed by Italy is as complex as it is heterogeneous.

Conclusions

The primary objective of this paper was to document and explain, at least in part, the Italian domestic debate and policies on migration during the political unrest in North Africa in 2011. The comparison between public representations of emergency and policies implemented can advance our understanding of crisis and migration towards an appreciation of nuances and counter-trends. Without embracing overly simplistic, Manichean accounts, I contend that the prevailing discursive theme of politicians tends to champion the sovereign "right to exclude" as a means of confronting supposedly impending migrant invasions of historic proportions. Yet a close examination of irregular flows in 2011 in fact shows that the numbers involved are not unprecedented. Such an exaggeration of the scale of migration flows is far from being a recent tendency. A large body of scholarship has documented the mechanics of how, and the reasons why, states feel compelled to reaffirm the shared significance of national membership, by targeting irregular migrants who only account for a proportion of overall migration trends (Geddes, 2000 and Joppke, 1998). The interesting twist, however, rests in the connection between this rhetoric and the policies adopted. Although the vocabulary of crisis was used extensively to justify the passage of urgent legal emergency measures, Italy continued to enact initiatives that went well beyond merely limiting the irregular arrival of migrants. Policy-making swings between persistency and emergency and related ambiguities (Zincone, 1998) are a continuing feature of Italian migration policy. The same applies to the attempt to engineer policies that can make opportunistic use of EU mechanisms. For example, the reliance on emergency discourse in relation to irregular arrivals when seeking European support and the issuing of temporary permits can be explained if we approach the relationship between Italy and the EU through the lens of *vincolo esterno*. Strategic advantages could be secured by either being bound by, or seemingly against, EU commitments. In the process we have seen how discourses and policies are being redefined by the international dimension.

An important corollary to this claim is that that the multifarious cycle of emergency rhetoric carries implications for, and is affected by, broader foreign policy dynamics. Italy's fluctuating stance, in calling for European help on migration while undermining the very rationale of the Schengen Treaty, exposes the fault-lines of Italian domestic and foreign policy. In fact, the opportunistic use of EU mechanisms is no panacea. It exposes domestic weaknesses and the concomitant 'credibility problem' vis-à-vis

EU partners (Dyson and Featherstone 1996: 11). To be sure, Italy's fickle behavior and its awareness of being "last among the great, first among the small" are enduring features of its century-long history in the community of nations (Bonvicini et al., 2011). Images of crisis complement and further consolidate these traits.

While this paper has expounded some of the trends behind Italian political behavior during the so-called Arab Spring, several questions remain to be answered. More attention should be paid to parties at the margins, as well as to the role of civil society in either fostering or hindering contending emergency mentalities on migration. In questioning our initial point of observation and our underlying assumptions, we may learn a great deal about the political environment within which parties operate and the extent to which the politics of emergency forms part of a more diversified tapestry of ideas and actors.

Note

1. Despite these disputes, Italy and France found some grounds for collaboration. On 8 April 2011, the French and Italian Interior Ministers announced an agreement for "joint air and naval patrols off the Tunisian coast to block departures of irregular migrants from Tunisia." Reportedly, the new measures were to be carried out with the assistance of Frontex (Migrants at Sea, 2011).

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